

# A COLLECTING TRIP TO LADAK

BY

V. S. LAPERSONNE

*Asst. Curator, Bombay Natural History Society*

PART I

*(With a map and five plates)*

It was a happy opportunity that allowed me to hitch my cart behind that of Col. Meinertzhagen's, when he organized a collecting trip to Ladak and on to the borders of Chinese Tibet for the purpose of acquiring a thorough knowledge of the resident bird life at the higher altitudes, and also authentic proof of the migratory species that cross the Great Himalayas and breed in the highlands of Ladak and Little Tibet. The success of this collecting enterprise and the subsequent recognition of new species added to the fauna of Ladak was the work of a congenial employer and friend and a first-class organizer. It is to him I owe whatever knowledge I have of systematic collecting and of preparing bird skins that will be a 'thing of joy for ever.'

The path of a bird collector is not always strewn with roses. His peregrinations may take him, at times, well beyond the pale, where perhaps, through sheer malice, he may see a 'snow man' and come back to us with photographic proofs of human foot-prints in the snow.

On the other hand the field is infinitely varied. There are hunting grounds to suit all tastes. The arid desert, the tropical forest with its varied and multi-hued denizens, or the bleak glacier-hung mountain top.

Col. Meinertzhagen and I left Pindi on February 21 and passing up the picturesque Jhelum Valley arrived in Srinagar on February 27, having collected a good many migrants on the way.

We left Srinagar on March 23 and crossing over the Great Himalayas at the depression known as the Zogi-la Pass, followed the Indus Valley and reached Leh on the 6th May. Leaving Leh on the 17th May we crossed over the Ladak range by the Changla and Marsimik la passes and reached Changchen-Mo Valley on the 31st May.

Retracing our steps we made a wide detour, skirting the Pangkong Lake to Shushal and thence crossing the Indus reached Puga on June 20. Returning to Leh we struck north and arrived at the foot of the Kara Koram Range on July 22.

We returned again to Leh and worked down the Indus to Skardu in Baltistan on August 13. Thence we returned to Kashmir by way of the Deosai Plateau and reached Srinagar on September 5.

During the period of collecting we covered over 2,000 miles and in the course of our travel reached an altitude of 21,050 ft. in the Kara Koram.

The Vale of Kashmir is described as a saucer-shaped valley between the Great Himalayas and the Outer Himalayas or the Pir Panjal

Mountains between the Great with a length of about 80 miles, a breadth of 24 miles, and a mean altitude of 5,600 feet above sea-level, corresponding in latitude to Palestine, the Mediterranean and California. Thus it has a blend of temperatures which should compare favourably with any other summer resort in the world.

For its genial beauty Kashmir should stand alone, for here you have a combination of lakes, the quiet beauty of cultivated fields and gardens, and a snow-capped mountain range which completely encircles the luxuriant valley.

It would be as great a mistake to generalize on the character of the Kashmiri, as to accept the theory that all Kashmiri women are beautiful. Yet if we must err, let it be on the side of caution. Sir Francis Younghusband, for many years Resident of Kashmir, has written a very interesting book on this province, and, as a man who knows what he is talking about says, 'A Kashmiri soldier is almost a contradiction in terms. There is no such thing. They will endure and suffer but they will not fight. And they are very careful of the truth.' Col. Meinertzhagen added a rider to that by saying, 'They are so careful of the truth that they seldom use it.' However, it is to their splendid endurance there we owe the success of our enterprise.

We had arrived in that 'Valley of Bliss' just when the almond blossoms were in bloom and Kashmir was warming up after a rather severe winter. We had intended staying in an hotel, but this became impossible. Being the earliest visitors we were preyed upon by every shopkeeper who had anything to sell. The climax of Col. Meinertzhagen's patience seems to have been reached when a none too clean fellow offered to give him a Turkish bath!

The 'Season' had not begun when we arrived in Kashmir and the houseboats were piled up along the banks. The Kashmiri boatman claims Noah as his ancestor and if, as Younghusband says, 'they didn't borrow the pattern of their boats from Noah, he must certainly have borrowed it from them.' They are known as MANJIS and live entirely on their boats with their families and cattle, and one can picture the squalor when all agree that the Kashmiri could make Kashmir perfection if only he would wash. We engaged a houseboat which gloried in the name of 'Arabella' but nothing else happened; and slipping anchor from a regular hulabaloo of 'Papier Mache Sir.' 'Shampoo—first Class?' and one or two pointed remarks as 'Hair cut and Shave Sir?' we worried our way down stream through the crowded waterways to the accompaniment of frantic yells of our boatmen and a return 'cuss fire from Kashmiri bargees' wives, which if understood suits the circumstances down to the ground.

We glided down the river passing the Maharaja's Palace and just beyond the precincts of the city a fair amount of dead horses and cattle, which the Kashmiri delights in pushing into the river when their days are done.

The most conspicuous object in the immediate neighbourhood of Srinagar is Takht-i-Suleiman, 'The throne of Solomon' a bare rocky hill rising 1,000 feet from the floor of the valley, and sur-



HOUSE-BOAT *Arabella* ON WULAR LAKE.



SIND VALLEY, ONE OF KASHMIR'S PICTURESQUE SIDE VALLEYS.



BALTAL, 9,000 FT., AT THE HEAD OF THE SIND VALLEY.



KOLAHOI, 17,800 FT., A CONSPICUOUS PEAK IN THE GREAT HIMALAYAS, WITH ITS GLACIER REACHING TO THE TREE-LINE.

mounted with a Hindoo temple. The view from this height will repay the climb. On one hand the climber looks down on the town of Srinagar, the Venice of the East, with its numerous waterways and gaily coloured boats, following the course of the Jhelum with little hamlets and temples clustered on its banks, and then away over the valley the land rises to the pine-covered slopes and the culminating touch to every Kashmir scene—the snows. Looking in the opposite direction the view is not so extensive. In the foreground the Dal Lake with stately poplars on its shores and on its placid waters the famous Isles of Chenars, mirrored again in its crystal clear depths. Fleecy clouds crept over the snow peaks that strung out in a jagged line against an azure sky while a bluey haze hung over the valley and the sparkling domes of the temples sent back the rays of the setting sun.

We camped in the lee of a craggy hill and had an uninterrupted view across the still waters of the Wular Lake to the stupendous snow-clad mountains, that stretched across the eastern sky. The pass into Ladak and the land of the laughing Bhudda led over these mountains, but was considered impassable at this time of the year. We decided to wait a month, and fill in the time collecting birds in the vicinity.

Few of the summer visitors, in the course of their migration from the plains and foot hills had arrived, though in those quite historic gardens of Shalimar where the 'playing fountains'—never play, the Paradise Flycatcher, or as he is known to the residents of Kashmir the 'Ribbon-bird', with a flash of satin white, darted among the dark green of the chenar trees.

At dawn the call of that game little fellow, the Chukar, who can be relied upon to give a good morning's sport, is echoed back and forth among the hills. Higher up on the pine-covered tops are the haunts of the Koklass (*Pucrasia macrolopha biddulphi*), and the Nutcracker (*Nucifraga multipunctata*).

In the valley the House Crow is entirely replaced by the Jackdaw during winter, and the sight of these birds leaving the valley in thousands every morning for villages along the Jhelum Valley and returning to roost among the chenar trees in the heart of the town, can hardly be missed by any visitor.

With the rise in the temperature and the melting of the snows on the heights, we decided to commence the trek that was to take us into Ladak and allow us to dangle our feet into Chinese Tibet. On the 25th March we bade farewell to the 'Arabella' at the mouth of the Sind River and moved up that beautiful valley, which at any season surpasses in beauty any other side valley of Kashmir. A thick forest of fir covered the northern slopes with glimpses of snow showing through the dark green, and toy-like villages clinging to the lower slopes.

Such natural beauty of scenery, the varied bird life and exhilarating climate enhanced our collecting spirit considerably. Even our local shikari, who usually suffered from a stomach or a backache, 'girded up his loins' to bag the wary Monal Pheasant, though these when brought in were too full of holes and lead to be of much use for specimens or the pot.

Small parties of Tits, Tree-Creepers and Nuthatches, which consisted of *Parus major kaschmiriensis*, *Parus melanolophus*, *Parus rufonuchalis rufonuchalis*, *Sitta europæa kaschmiriensis*, and *Certhia himalayana*(?) frequented the forests. The sub-specific rank of this last bird is under discussion as being intermediate between the Himalayan and Turkestan races.

The Orange Bullfinches (*Pyrrhula aurantiaca*) were not uncommon in the fir forests. Col. Meinertzhagen writes of this bird in the *Ibis* of July 1927, 'The brilliant orange of their plumage showed up like some precious stone on the drab dull green of the ground on which they fed. After a moment they would fly up into a tree, soon to return one by one and sit quite still munching small seeds. Their dislike of movement when feeding and when in a tree was due to their inherited consciousness that in such brilliant plumage they would become visible and an easy prey to any feathered enemy.'

As we moved higher up the valley, forest bird life became scarcer.

The few that braved the winter conditions at 8,000 feet were the Brown Dipper, White-capped Redstart, Guldenstadt's Afghan Redstart, and higher still, the White-breasted Dipper.

On the 7th April we left Traghol, 9,500 feet. This was our fourth day in this picturesque valley. Each day brought forth more wonders in mountain scenery; each turn in the road a surprise. The thick belt of fir trees thinned out; giving place to the slender hardy birch. Snow lay thick everywhere, at times completely bridging the river, and then one enters Sonamarg. Glaciers move down the flanking mountains, and in spring, the snow having melted, the glacial formation reaching down to the tree line, is a mass of dazzling ice and bare jagged rocks.

Kolahoi, 17,850 feet, its sharp peak conspicuous from any point along the Sind Valley ridge is the highest point in the Great Himalayas. The peak is six thousand feet above the glacial formation, which stretches down to the tree line.

We arrived at Boltal 9,700 feet on the 10th April. It has a delightful dak-bungalow at the head of the Sind Valley, and is completely surrounded by the wildest and grandest scenery of snow, mountain and mist.

This is the stage when the traveller realizes what he is up against. The Zogi-la Pass which crosses the Great Himalayas into Ladak and which is usually open to traffic after the 15th May, was bunged high with snow; the only alternative was a snow-bound, precipitous ravine that really was a frozen mountain torrent, covered over with snow.

We remained three days here and every day were made acquainted with the awe-inspiring sight of avalanches. With the thawing of the snow, a few tons would rush down the slopes with the roar of an express train.

The traveller can never be too cautious in his plans of an assault on these mountain fastnesses during winter.

He must be up and away before dawn to avoid the avalanches, his face and hands well greased to avoid frost-bite, his feet shod

with grass shoes for a firm foot-hold on the frozen surface of the snow, and, as fancy dictates, a flask of rum or brandy, or if this is 'haram,' chocolate will be found an admirable substitute.

At an ungodly hour in the early dawn of Easter Sunday on April 13 when the temperature was below zero—and our circulation almost that—we set out for the assault on the snow-bound ravine. Ten minutes brisk walk brought us to the foot of the ravine.

Here each man readjusted his load and snapped his belt into the 'starvation hole.'

The coolies were dimly visible in the darkness which precedes dawn as they grouped together for a final smoke. Their gnome-like figures stood out against a sombre sky, and little points of light from their cigarettes, stabbed into the darkness. Col. Meinertzhagen gave the signal and we fell into single file and began the assault.

That scramble up the ravine lasted a little over an hour and for the greater part it was a 'fly-on-the-wall' business. To add to the discomfort, a howling gale, accompanied by a blizzard, tore down the closed-in ravine. 'A gale,' as our cook said, 'guaranteed to disembowel a camel,' or the equivalent to that in Hindustani.

Looking back on the events of that day, my diary helps with the one elucidating word—'Hell,' followed by notes of exclamations, queries and asterisks, which apparently had its soothing effects, and continues 'But still the wind blew, howling over the peaks, the stinging snow finding its way down your neck, in your ears and nostrils. The fine snow being blown from the heights, resembled, as it caught the sun's rays, a spreading white fire.' We topped the pass and paused for a 'breather' and watched the coolies; these gallant fellows who will not fight, but who can be thoroughly relied upon in these mountains, were putting up a final spurt to gain the top, and as they filed past with their 40 lbs. loads, we could not help but cheer.

Physical disasters have made the Kashmiri selfish; tyranny has made him a liar, and superstition has made him timid. Yet, as he swings along, to the lilt of a mountain song, indifferent to the cold or steep ascents, we have nothing but admiration to offer.

We were now in that range of snows, the snowy range *par excellence*, which extends in a southern direction in a line of snowy peaks, seen from Simla, to the famous peaks of Gangotri and Nanda Devi in Garhwal. And we struggled along over a snow-bound freezing cold valley, among the snow clad giants for three days, seeing extremely little of bird life. The winter conditions prevailing in the region, would hardly appeal to any birds, not even to that curious bird which seems to spend its life either flying at ridiculous altitudes or sitting on bare rocks—the Chough.

As we neared Ladak the temperature rose, though the altitude (11,500) remained the same, and on the 16th April we were thankful to see the last of the 'snowy range *par excellence*,' and which, omitting those unrivalled mountains seen from Darjeeling, is second to none.

We fully expected to see, after crossing the Himalayas, a broad undulating plateau stretching away from our feet to the eastern

horizon; instead our vision was plunged into a conglomeration of barren hills, parched valleys and gaunt Bhuddists' monasteries, which seem perched on every peak.

The track now followed the contour of the hills, with not a tree to break the monotony of barren hillside or a river cradled in the valleys. At Molbek the atmosphere, people, and villages entirely change. We were walking now on 'the roof of the world,' among an ancient race, with still more ancient customs. Monuments, prayers and supplications carved and inscribed on stone, are piled high along the caravan route which reaches to Leh, the capital of Ladak.

We put in a few days at Molbek chiefly for the Himalayan Snow Cock (*Tetraogallus himalayanus*) which were quite common on the hills, and secured quite a good series with the help of Tibetan guides who take their pleasures in dead earnest, and appear to delight in seeing you, purple about the gills, climbing to 14,000 or 16,000 feet in pursuit of these birds.

We found that these descended to the river at an early hour of the morning for a drink, and, as the day warmed, moved higher up—at times to the summit of the bare hills—where they roosted during the warmer hours of the day, at elevations of 14,000 and 16,000 feet. They rarely fly, and then only to cross the valley, if hard pressed by a sportsman. They weigh about 5 lbs. and it takes a good knock to bring them down. During the breeding season they utter a long drawn-out whistle—a dismal sound well associated with the dreary isolated haunts of this bird. The limits of the Himalayan species appear to be at 16,000 feet, and roughly all that region south of the main Ladak chain. Further north, the Tibetan Snow Cock replaces the Himalayan.

To refer again to the Tibetan gun-bearer: he has no equal in these hills, possessing, as he does, an unflagging spirit, an unquenchable zeal and a clean sense of humour—but keep to windward of him, for if to his lee you can judge the full extent of his cleanliness!

The road now follows the course of the Indus and we plunge again into a labyrinth of confined valleys and gorges, shut in on either hand by vertical walls of rock, and emerge with the Indus into a flat bottomed broad valley that gently slopes to the foot of the Ladak range, where the flat roofed houses of Leh crowd around the monastery, as chickens do round a well-fed hen.

Leh, the great emporium of the trade which passes between India, Turkestan and Chinese Tibet, has been the starting point of many an adventurous journey into the last named country. The town does not seem to have much of a historical past. The unwarlike Ladakis, even with nature fighting on their side, were conquered by the rulers of Kashmir. The Kashmiri troops left to garrison Leh were, on one occasion, slaughtered by a strong force of Chinese from Tibet, since when Ladak, though still a province of Kashmir, is ecclesiastically subject to Lhasa, paying tribute, in the guise of presents, to mollify the Chinese who are held in wholesome fear by the Ladakhis to this day.

The Ladakhi, or 'hybrid' Tibetan is of a mild easy-going disposition, thoroughly honest, with the thinking capacity of a Yak.

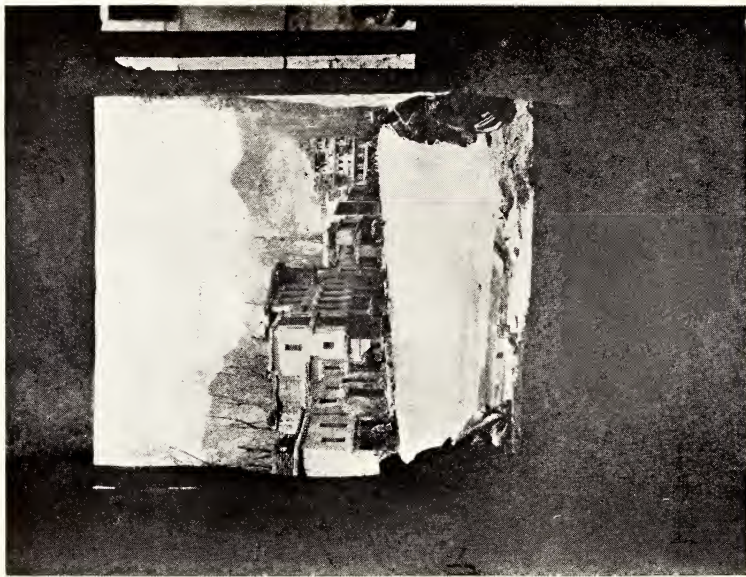




A MORNING'S BAG OF SNOW COCK AT MOULBECK, 11,000 FEET.



MARKET PLACE AT LEH, AND THE 'GOMPA' ABOVE, THE WINTER QUARTERS OF THE ECCLESIASTICAL HEAD OF WESTERN TIBET.



LOOKING THROUGH THE GATEWAY OF LEH TO THE  
LADAK RANGE.



LEH IN SPRINGTIME.

The effects of high altitude may account for his wholesome horror for any form of manual labour and he seems fortunate in possessing a spouse who fills the roles of husbandman and handmaid. A part of her dowry is a turquoise studded headgear—the remainder of it—her slave-like willingness to work.

The price of a bride or brides, fluctuates with the supply, and on our visit in 1925, the women constituted 80 per cent of the population of Leh. What a happy hunting ground is Leh for our be-(k)-nighted bachelors of Bombay!

Since time immemorial, man's soul has yearned for a ball of some kind. An 'oblong' one, a wooden one, or even a rag one. But a ball of some description it must be and until he gets it, he is never really happy. The Ladakhi is no exception to the rule. Every fair sized village has its polo ground and though the game, as played in the plains of India, is a tame affair to the one played here, there is a general tendency to adhere to rules.

Throughout the hour's play there is no change of ponies, the game is fast and furious, and the ball never out of play.

Fouls are unknown; in a scrimmage, you may take a 'whack' at your opponent or his horse. On occasions the game is played down the broad main street, and no rule exists preventing an attack from a player who has lain in ambush in one of the shops flanking the polo ground.

The word '*pulu*', which means 'ball' in Tibetan has given rise to the theory that polo originated among the Mongolians, but history tells us that the game drifted from Persia through Turkestan into China and Japan, thence from Tibet to Gilgit and so to the plains.

The earliest records of this 'game of kings' in Tibet seem to tend more to feats of horsemanship and skill with stick and ball, than to the scoring of goals.

The nature of the present game is a mixture of the two. The ball is brought into play, in the event of a goal, in a most skilful manner. A player gallops at full speed down the 'wing' and, near the half way line, still at full gallop, tosses the ball into the air and smites it square towards his opponent's goal.

Being the centre of the trade of these parts, Leh boasts a reasonable sized bazaar and market.

Goods are more often bartered for goods than sold for cash. The Yarkandi from over the Kara Koram arrives in Spring with his caravan of wool and dried fruits, exchanging these for silks and wearing apparel from Kashmir. The Tibetan after a long and arduous journey over wind-swept desolate plains, arrives with his loads of Chinese brocade and quaint ornaments. The Kashmiri floods the market with all conceivable goods, even to the extent of European provisions. The Ladakhi contributes an occasional Yak tail.

Above the market and perched on an impassable rock are the winter quarters of the ecclesiastic head of Western Tibet. Like most monasteries it has an equally impassable 'stairway' leading up to the entrance, but offers no other obstruction to sightseers.

Bhuddhism may not interest everyone of us, and few travellers have the time to 'worry' about such matters. We accept the

existence of those silent edifices as part of the abominable landscape and pass on. Yet in those silent evenings, when the clouds have crept up the valley, the monastery sticks out above like an isolated island in a billowy sea; when the still night air throbs with the sonorous convocations from the deep-throated trumpets up in the monastery, when the moon shines down on the unscrutable face of Bhudda—it would almost seem as if Bhudda walks this earth again.

We have not the desire to tackle Bhuddism, nor the time to dip into dimmest antiquity. With our object ever in view we begin preparations to leave Leh for the borders of Tibet proper, the region of the wild yak, the wild ass and the fabulous unicorn of Tibet.

No jungle exists in the whole of Ladak; the few trees, mostly willow and poplar, are planted in villages for building purposes and fuel. The traveller will find no 'shady' tree under which to have his lunch between stages and, as he travels higher the gardens around villages will thin out and disappear.

The bird life then, for the most part, is terrestrial in habits and palaeartic in its zone of distribution. Thus the traveller meets, when he crosses the great Himalayas, the Magpie (*Pica pica bactriana*). Col. Meinertzhagen points out, in his paper on the Birds of Ladak in the *Ibis*, that the Magpie is essentially a bird of the wind-swept, open and almost treeless Ladak, in contradicton to Baker's habitat of this bird as being Kashmir, Kumaon and Gharwal.

Visitors to Kumaon and Gharwal will bear out the statement of Col. Meinertzhagen that the Magpie is not a bird of 'well-wooded' parts. Observations in Mesopotamia, Persia and Baluchistan, all countries that could do with a bit of vegetation, shew that the Magpie frequents the upland steppes.

The Tibetan Raven (*Corvus corax tibetanus*) is met with all over Ladak. His bell-like tones should be unmistakable to any visitor to the highlands of Ladak.

The Red-billed Chough (*Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax himalayanus*) extends over the greater part of Ladak, chiefly over 12,000 feet. It occurs on either side of the Great Himalayas as low as 6,000 feet in winter, up to 19,000 feet in summer.

The Yellow-billed Chough (*Pyrrhocorax graculus forsythi*) hardly distinguishable, on the wing, from the above bird appears to frequent the same localities—though not quite so common. Both these birds were breeding at Leh at 11,600 feet. Horned Larks (*Eremophila alpestris longirostris*) were common from 12,000 feet to the snow line.

The Great Tit (*Parus major kaschmiriensis*), common on either side of the Himalayas, extends for a considerable distance into Ladak, wherever there were trees.

Snow-Cocks (*Tetraogallus himalayensis himalayensis*) and the Chukor (*Alectoris graeca pallescens*) as distinguishable from *Alectoris graeca chukar*, a darker race, were common in the alpine regions of Ladak.

We left Leh on the 17th May for the valley of Chang-chen-Mo, 245 miles westward, which is the furthest point reached by any

traveller, for beyond lies a wilderness of the coldest, bleakest and most desolate region conceivable.

We crossed over the Ladak range by the Chang-la pass, a regular corker in the way of passes—and one which touched the scale at 18,000 feet.

We had camped just below the pass at 15,700 feet the evening before the ascent and were fortunate in securing a fine series of Brandt's Mountain Finch (*Montifringilla brandti hæmatopyga*). They appear to be birds of the extreme altitudes and are met with usually on the fringe of the snows, upto 18,000 feet.

Before we crawl over the pass, I must dip my flag to Col. Meinertzhagen, who, with the tenacity with which leaders are made, got us over the pass when things looked their worst.

A relay of coolies were engaged to prevent any unnecessary delay on the pass, for what with the height and the thawing of the snow progress must be slow. There is an added danger after sunset on such passes. A caravan caught after sundown at 18,000 feet, would find it difficult to get through without losing a large part of its 'cattle' and men. Such a catastrophe cannot be prevented in view of the sudden drop in the temperature after sunset.

When tackling a high pass, you must, like Felix, 'keep on walking'. It is preferable, to becoming a ruddy icicle, and helps the circulation. Your progress may resemble the gait of a beetle over the ridges and furrows of a ploughed field, but there is always the consoling thought that all passes have a summit.

As much as I would like to forget this one instance of the effects of high altitude, it may not come amiss to give first hand experience.

At altitudes over 16,000 feet, or at times 15,000 feet, it depends on one's physical condition, the traveller begins to feel the oppressiveness of the atmosphere. The mere act of turning over in bed is a respiratory exertion; while ordinarily the respiration resembles the effects of a second hand bicycle pump.

A general listlessness is first observed, followed by a splitting headache, as if a smack has been taken at the skull with an axe—and the iron left in. Follows, if you have got it bad, a violent desire to be 'sick.'

I doubt if there is any preventive for these effects, though 'Crystallized Ginger' may be recommended.

There is also a tendency to knock off 'food stuffs,'—particularly meat, though the craving for 'sweet stuffs', such as sugar and jam, increases.

If on the other hand you are one of those who are blessed with the innards of a Tibetan—the symptoms will be noticeable in your camp. Your cook, if you haven't left him to die on one of the passes, usually finds he has a shocking grievance against the Shikari or *vice versa*. This being appeased, he develops a complication of disorders and a desire to peg out.

We crossed over the Changla pass and eleven miles beyond camped in a willow garden at 14,500 feet. Just beyond the pass we secured a Goosander (*Merganser castor*) which occurs sparingly on large sized rivers above 10,000 feet. Later on (July) we found the young in down on the Indus River below Leh.